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MUFON

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UFO INVESTIGATORS

Do they believe in men from outer space? Not necessarily. But by interviewing people who have seen UFOs, two North Shore women are trying to find scientific explanations for the hundreds of mysterious flying things people see each year.



Nancy Shackleton photos

Marge Christensen, section director for MUFON.

By SHEILA BARTH

Marge Christensen and Linda Seal are investigators for MUFON — the Mutual Unidentified Flying Objects Network.

And while their line of work may sound exotic, it is really quite down-to-earth.

"We're talking about nuts and bolts, not Star Wars," said Mrs. Christensen, a former school teacher and a Beverly resident.

"I'm a normal person," said her investigating partner, Linda Seal, a teacher at Beverly's Briscoe Middle School. "I'm a former Peace Corps worker, a food co-oper. I belong to the League of Women Voters and the First Baptist Church in Beverly."

Mrs. Christensen said she was lured into investigating UFOs because she was intrigued how unexplained flying objects were reported to fly in ways normal aircraft cannot. She said she decided to work with MUFON director Raymond Fowler because his investigating approaches are scientific and thorough.

Mrs. Seal, 38, said investigating UFOs provides welcome relief from her everyday life. She said she never had any interest in unidentified flying objects until her friend, Mrs. Christensen, asked her to accompany her on a UFO investigation nine months ago.

"We were like two scared chickens at first," Mrs. Seal said.

MUFON has 30 investigators in Massachusetts, and 1,000 nationwide. The two work under the direction of Fowler, a Hamilton resident well-known for his UFO studies.

Mrs. Christensen, as MUFON's section director for Essex County, travels to local police departments, leaving her name and that of other investigators. According to Mrs. Christensen, a person who has seen a UFO often goes to the police first, usually to find out if what he or she saw was something easily explainable: an air ballon, a helicopter, an advertising airplaine with lighted wings, or some other unusual flying machine.

If the person wishes, he is put in touch with the investigators. All the investigations are done in the strictest confidentiality, said Mrs. Christensen, because some people are reluctant to admit they've seen something they can't explain, fearing they'll appear silly to their friends or family members.

First, an interview is held over the telephone. Then, if necessary, a personal interview is held.

A person wo claims to have seen a UFO is asked to fill out as many as 12 long, detailed forms.

The first form includes questions on the physical description of the light or object seen; time, date, and place of the sighting; flight characteristics of the object; and personal information on such things as hearing and vision. The person is also asked to make a drawing of the object.

Another questionnaire, designed as a mulitple-choice checklist, asks about psychological and physiological effects of the encounter; relationship of the UFO to the witness (did it hover over the witness, approach the witness, touch, or merely fly over without any apparent interest to the witness); and whether the witness is interested in or has abilities in psychic phenomena.

"Usually, the type of sighting we handle is something flying overhead that doesn't stay and is gone within five to 20 seconds. It doesn't leave markings or kidnap people. Ours are generally routine," Mrs. Christensen said.

Recently, however, Mrs. Seal and Mrs. Christensen responded to a call on the North Shore (they would not publicize the location) where a woman reported seeing several round, cylindrical objects close to ground level come into her view, hover, and disappear. She described the objects as pastel-colored, and non-metallic, each 10 to 20 feet in diameter.

When the investigators checked out the area, they discovered unusual patterns in the grass, 40 feet away from where the woman saw the UFOs. The markings on the ground could possibly be "tracings," physical characteristics left behind by the UF0, said Mrs. Christensen. They staked out the area foot by food, and took many photographs. The matter is still under investigation.

Once the interviews and other field investigations are finished, a lengthy report is sent to the Center for UFO Studies in Evanston, Ill., as well as MUFON headquarters.

Mrs. Christensen said her curiosity about heightened when she found out government agencies turned their backs on increasing numbers of UFO reports. She said pilots must report all UFO sightings to the government only. Their reports are kept confidential.

According to Walter Webb, assistant director of the Charles Hayden Planetarium in Boston and another UFO investigator, pilots are bound and gagged by the Freedoms of Government Act.

"Their (the government's) philosophy is to keep quiet until you have all the facts together," Webb said. "Therefore they conceal information from the public."

The United States is far behind other countries in studying and investigating UFOs, Webb said. Policemen in some parts of Europe, including France, must take a course in UFOlogy, the study of aerial phenomena.

Webb defines a UFO as "any unexplained aerial phenomenon that is visible in the air or on the ground and remains unexplained even after evaluation by competent investigator."

While many sightings are of the flashing-lights-in-the-sky type, some are much more dramatic "close encounters of the third kind," a term made famous by the movie of the same name.

According to Mrs. Christensen, close encounters of the third kind are UFO sightings that produce physical, psychological, physiological, emotional, or mental differences in the person who came in contact with them.

Webb said persons who have experienced extremely dramatic encounters often cannot relate what they've seen either because they are too terrified, or because it has been blocked out of their minds, possibly through mental telepathy emanating from the spaceship.

"Many abduction cases are wild. A large percentage of these cases are hidden or not reported," Webb said.

Webb has not had a close encounter, but said he did see something on August 3, 1951, while camping with a group of youngsters on Silver Lake, Mich.

"Between 11 and midnight, we saw a yellowish light moving east to west over the southern hills bordering the lake."

Webb said the light moved in a perfect wave-like pattern across the sky.

In the course of investigating UFOs, Webb said, he has learned that what he saw flew in a way characteristic for aerial phenomena — it traveled in a pulse-like wave path, going faster on the downswing.

Webb said the summer after his sighting, there was a "flap," or wave, of UFO sightings. The last flap occurred in the United States in 1973, he said.

Webb said Massachusetts produces a smattering of reported UFOs comapred to the White Mountain area of New Hampshire, which is a hotbed of outer space activity.

Webb told a story of one woman who saw a light pacing her car as she traveled home late at night.

As she approached busy, lighted areas, the bright light blended in with streetlights and neon signs.

Suddenly, she was aware of a globe-shaped brilliant orange-colored craft, manned by a humanoid, hovering overhead.

Her hands seemed frozen to the wheel. Her car suddenly accelerated.

As the UFO loomed closer, the woman drove across a lawn, stopped the car, and ran to a nearby house. The "thing" disappeared when she sought aid from people living there.

Webb calls this experience the "witness car control factor," a phenomena in which both the person who sees the UFO and the person's vehicle are affected.

Today, cases where cars have been directed to other areas by objects hovering overhead is more commonplace, said Webb.

The 47-year old scientist said people who have had a close encounter with a UFO often suffer from "high strangeness," caused by being very close to the object.

Personal contact by a humanoid or outer space craft often results in the victim suffering from amnesia, and memory of the encounter can only be recalled through hypnosis, Webb said.

Currently, the astronomer-biologist is preparing a documentation of 114 reports of unexplainable encounters with extra-terrestrial travelers. He plans to analyze the information on a computer.

According to Webb, 80 to 90 percent of reports received by the Hayden Planetarium are IFOs, identifiable flying objects.

He said many astronomers say they are sure no life from outer space is visiting this planet because any civilization that could live in space would be too far away.

"Astronomers believe there is life out there; they just can't believe that life is visiting us," Webb said.

Meanwhile, public belief in visitors from outer space seems to be growing. Mrs. Christensen said a recent Gallup poll showed 60 percent of all Americans believe in the existence of UFOs.

Joseph Santangelo of Reading, a member of MUFON for 13 years and the group's state director, said 25 years ago "investigators wouldn't touch a case that involved entities. They simply threw out a lot of information that didn't fit."

Ten years ago, investigators began accepting cases involving humanoids and reports of outer space visitors abducting humans.

"Now we take all information, whether it fits or not," he said.

Sheila Barth writes for the Beverly Times.

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